

Church-based scouting alternatives attract interest

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(RNS) They have pledges. They have merit badges. And they may go camping.

But they're not the Boy Scouts.

Across the country, there are decades-old religious alternatives with names like Pathfinders (Seventh-day Adventist), Royal Ambassadors (Southern Baptist) and Royal Rangers (Assemblies of God).

And as the Boy Scouts of America considers whether to change its membership policy to admit gay members (but continue its ban on gay leaders), some of these groups are fielding inquiries from people concerned about the action the BSA may take.

Leaders of the Seventh-day Adventist Church's Pathfinders have been asked about their program in light of the pending Boy Scout vote, said James Black, the Adventists' North American director of youth ministries.

"If individuals saw the Pathfinders as a viable option for their children, we would welcome them with open arms," he said.

Some denominational leaders with strong ties to the Boy Scouts -including Roman Catholics and United Methodists -have said they are still mulling the Scouts' proposed change, which will face a vote during the BSA's May 22-24 annual meeting.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, which hosts more Scouts troops than any other organization, said it is "satisfied that BSA has made a thoughtful, good-faith effort" with the proposed resolution. But Frank Page, president of the Southern Baptist Convention's Executive Committee, said the change "would force sponsoring churches to subordinate their convictions to stay involved with the Boy Scouts."

A recent story in Baptist Press included tips on how a church can start a Royal Ambassadors program. The missions-focused program for elementary school boys, is hosted in about 3,000 churches, most of which are Southern Baptist.

Steve Heartsill, managing editor of the program's curriculum, said there has been "some uptick in phone calls" as the vote approaches.

The Assemblies of God offices in Springfield, Mo., have received many calls in the last few months about its Royal Rangers program. "The inquiries come in waves, increasing each time a new report on the topic releases," the denomination said.

Dick Broene, executive director of the Calvinist Cadet Corps, said his evangelical organization heard from Scout leaders who had considered leaving the BSA when it appeared the group might approve including gay leaders. The CCC includes Bible lessons in weekly meetings and connects merit badges to Scripture.

“We are very similar in many ways, with the merit badges and rank advancement, uniforms and emphasis on camping,” said Broene, whose organization drew 1,200 participants to a 2011 triennial camporee in Michigan. “The difference is we have Christ at the heart of everything we do.”

Like the Calvinist Cadet Corps, the CSB (Christian Service Brigade) Ministries is not connected to a particular denomination. It recently moved from Wheaton, Ill., to Hamburg, N.Y. , and has fielded inquiries.

“We are difficult to find,” said Dale Kinkade, CSB Ministries’ Ohio Valley regional director, who is handling Scout-related calls. “Despite that, we have had quite a few inquiries of who and what we are.”

Kinkade said his evangelical group is not as outdoors-oriented as the BSA, but it has a “Shape N Race Derby” that resembles the Scouts’ Pinewood Derby races. It also features the rank of “Herald of Christ,” which is similar to the Boy Scouts’ Eagle Scout.

“Our goal is to go beyond raising up character, and especially in citizenship, but really focuses in on building up a young man who has awareness of a personal relationship with Jesus Christ,” he said.

Supporters of OnMyHonor.net, a new organization spearheading efforts to oppose the BSA policy change, said in a May 5 simulcast that some Scout-affiliated church groups are considering pulling out if the vote doesn’t go their way. Religious groups charter 70 percent of the Scout-sponsoring organizations.

“That relationship is at risk, as is the future of one of the last nonreligious institutions that has not yielded to political correctness,” said a narrator of the simulcast, which was hosted by the Family Research Council.

Boy Scouts officials are quite aware of the potential effect of a gay-related policy change on their local religious units. According to an executive summary on the BSA website, a change in the youth membership policy “would be consistent with the religious beliefs of the BSA’s major chartered organizations.” A policy change about both leaders and members could cause “membership losses in a range from 100,000 to 350,000.”

Some religious Scout leaders said they have not had any inquiries from people wondering about Scouting alternatives.

“We have no plans to offer alternatives,” said Larry Coppock, the United Methodist Church’s national director of Scouting ministries.

R. Chip Turner, national chairman of the BSA’s Religious Relationships Task Force, said he’s grateful the Scouts delayed the process about a potential policy change. Now, he said, it’s a matter of prayer as the task force gathers at the BSA annual meeting before the vote occurs.

“I have asked several task force members from various faith groups to lead us in a season of prayer for divine guidance in the voting process,” he said.